

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Pietro Antonio Novelli (Venice 1729-1804)

A Recumbent Lion

Pen and brown ink and brown wash.

29.3 x 42.1 cm. (11 1/2 x 16 5/8 in.)

Provenance:

Sale, Florence, Sotheby Parke Bernet Italia, 14 November 1978, lot 486;

Anna Bozza, Venice;

With Cristiano Barozzi, Barozzi Antichità, Venice;

Purchased from him in May 1990 by Wallace Bradway, New Haven, Connecticut;

Thence by descent.



The outlines of Pietro Antonio Novelli's long career are known through his posthumously published memoirs, which appeared thirty years after his death. Trained in the studio of Giambattista Pittoni, he also came under the influence of Gaspare Diziani and Francesco Guardi, while his earliest paintings - a *Saint Joseph* in the Venetian church of Santa Fosca and a *Presentation in the Temple* in the church of San Francesco in Rovigo, both painted in 1759 - show the influence of Jacopo Amigoni. Among other early documented works are a set of illustrations for an edition of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, published in 1760, and several plates for the complete edition of Carlo Goldoni's *Commedie*, published in 1761 and 1788. In 1768 Novelli was accepted as a member of the Accademia in Venice, for whom he submitted an *Allegory of the Arts* as a reception piece.

Novelli painted frescoes in several Venetian palaces, including that of the Corniani-Tivan, Mangilli, Mocenigo and Sangiatoffetti families, and painted altarpieces and decorative frescoes throughout Northern Italy, in Udine, Padua and Bologna, as well as in Venice.

“Novelli was one of the most active participants in the great wave of decorative painting that swept Venice and the Veneto in the last thirty years of the Venetian republic”.¹

Among the artist's patrons was Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, for whom in 1772 he painted a mythological composition as a pendant to a work by Pompeo Batoni. By 1779 Novelli had settled in Rome, where he spent most of the next twenty years, and where he came under the influence of Neoclassicism and such artists as Batoni and Anton Raphael Mengs. During his years in Rome, he completed a ceiling painting of *Cupid and Psyche* for the Villa Borghese and received commissions for the decoration of several Roman palaces. The last years of his career were spent in Venice. His son Francesco Novelli followed in his father's footsteps as an engraver and designer of prints and book illustrations.

Novelli is best known today for his drawings. He was an inventive and versatile draughtsman, and, as one contemporary source noted,

“The drawings and painted works by Novelli showed not just a profound knowledge, but also a supreme degree of fantasy, and I myself saw him change in ten and more ways the same subject”.²

His many and varied drawings - executed in both pen and ink and watercolour and, more rarely, in red chalk - include studies for paintings and altarpieces, as well as a significant number of designs for book illustrations, prints and frontispieces. Large groups of Novelli's lively and

¹ J. Byam Shaw and George Knox, *The Robert Lehman Collection, Vol. VI: Italian Eighteenth-Century Drawings*, New York 1987, p.74.

² ‘*Regnava sì nel disegno che nelle opere a pennello del Sig. Novelli oltre che un profondo sapere una somma fecondità di fantasia ed io stesso l'ho veduto cambiare in dieci e più maniere un medesimo soggetto.*’; G. Avelloni, *Documenti intorno agli ultimi anni del Sig. Pietro Antonio Novelli*, MS.877.26, Venice, Seminario Patriarcale, p. 14.

colourful drawings are today in the collections of the Museo Correr in Venice, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York and the Albertina in Vienna.

The lion is traditionally associated with Mark the Evangelist, patron saint of Venice. Depictions of lions feature prominently on the city's monuments, such as the façade of Saint Mark's Basilica. For the present drawing, Novelli may have taken inspiration from one of the four statues guarding the entrance of the Arsenal. The monumental lion, reclining to the right of the entrance, is dated to the 4th century BC. It originated on the Sacred Way linking Athens to Eleusis, where it stood at the foot of the Temple of Hephaestus. As a topographical marker, it signalled the end of the road to Piraeus, while the first large lion - associated with the port of Athens - indicated the beginning of the same route. Like the Piraeus lion, the so-called "Lion of Hephaestus" was brought to Venice in 1687 by Francesco Morosini and installed before the Arsenal in 1688. In 1692 the Venetian Senate ordered an inscription cut on its base: "ATHENIENSIA VENETÆ CLASSIS TROPHŒA VENETI SENATVS DECRETO IN NAVALIS VESTIBVLO CONSTITVTA".



Fig. 1. *The Lion of Hephaestus*, 4th century BC, pentelic marble. Venice, Arsenal.

A pair of drawings at the Courtauld Gallery in London appear to allude to its companion, the *Piraeus Lion*, which in Novelli's day, as now, kept its vigil at the threshold of the Serenissima's naval Arsenale (figs. 2-3).



Figs. 2-3. Pietro Antonio Novelli, *Seated Lion*, pen and brown ink, grey and black wash, white bodycolour on laid paper prepared with a pink wash, 29 x 18.5 and 28.5 x 18.2 cm respectively. London, Courtauld Gallery.

Other drawings related to the Arsenal Lions series are the double sheet sold by Sotheby's in 2018 (*A Seated Lion* and *A Recumbent Lion*, fig. 4), which, compared to ours, appear to be of a lower degree of finishing, and a sheet currently with Cortona Fine Art, on prepared paper, with the animal's paw placed on a sphere (fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Pietro Antonio Novelli, *A Recumbent Lion*, brown ink and wash, 22.2 x 32 cm. Sotheby's London, 4 July 2018, lot 154.
Fig. 5. Pietro Antonio Novelli, *A Recumbent Lion with a Sphere*, Pen and brown ink, grey watercolour, and heightened with white on ochre-coloured prepared paper, 12 x 19 cm. Cortona Fine Art.